

# Bilingual Education

## Using a Virtual Guest Speaker and Online Discussion To Expand Latino Preservice Teachers' Consciousness

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For Latinos who teach language minority children, pedagogical effectiveness depends on a positive self-esteem related to their ethnic identity and self-concept (Wood, 1991). Teacher preparation programs must show them the value of cultural knowledge and provide them with skills to enhance their future students' ethnic identities and academic improvement (Clark & Flores, 2001).

In today's sociopolitical climate in the United States, nativist anti-immigrant movements drive the marginalization and disempowerment of Latino schoolchildren (Leistyna, 2002). Latino teachers need more than a shared ethnicity with their students to help them develop their full potential (Berta-Avila, 2004). Bilingual educators and proponents of dual language programs must understand the often camouflaged hegemonic ideological motives behind most organized opposition to bilingual education (Cardinale, et al, 1998).

It is essential that teachers of linguistic minorities develop a critical cultural and professional identity, and this development can and should begin in teacher education programs (Rios, 2008). For many Latino preservice teachers, such development begins as an evolutionary transformative process that requires assistance by knowledgeable others (Clark & Flores, 2001).

This study describes how a knowledgeable other, an expert guest speaker, facilitated the awakening of a critical awareness of issues related to native language (L1) preservation and globalization among Latino preservice teachers in an online dialogue.

In the Spring of 2008, Lily Wong Fillmore, a renowned scholar and advocate for linguistic minorities, participated as an online guest expert in an electronic

discussion forum at the conclusion of a bilingual teacher preparation course. The forum took place on a secure anonymous Electronic Learning Community (ELC) using anonymous login protocols during a weekend near the end of the semester.

The researcher, the course instructor, noted the emergence of discussion categories uniquely attributable to Fillmore's intervention, and important to Latino preservice students' professional identity formation and sociopolitical awareness. The categories were discovered by a qualitative content analysis within a holistic interpretive framework, motivated by the research question: how had the online environment, and the guest speaker's intervention in it, mediated students' construction of meaning and raised their awareness of issues beyond the scope of the course and important to their professional development?

Theoretical coding of the latent content of two discussion categories discovered a unifying theme in students' construction of new knowledge: an awareness of the importance of language policy and culture and advocacy for linguistic minority children for their development as bilingual educators. This article describes how their dialogue with Fillmore, a "knowledgeable other," created this new understanding.

### Literature on Virtual Guest Speakers

To contextualize the significance of Fillmore's interaction with these Latino preservice teachers, a review of the research on online guest speakers is in order. Such a review begins with an understanding of effective college teaching. Barr and Tagg (1995) and Fink (2003) make the broader point that university course structures (syllabi, lectures, activities) facilitate student learning. In higher education, students engage with a range of ideas and people not previously experienced, which is the fundamental purpose of education

(Schulman, 2002). Online discussions can deepen the meaning making process through student-to-student interactions (Moore, 1989). Asynchronous web based discussions with students similar to those in this study promoted deeper levels of critical reflection (Ostorga & Yanes, 2007).

Engagement with online guest speakers offers additional learning resources (Boettcher & Cartwright, 1997). The open ended nature of asynchronous dialogue, such as with guest speakers, enables knowledge construction (Hiltz, 1998). Open ended dialogue with expert practitioners offered Rowe's accounting students a range of "theory to practice" perspectives that he had been unable to provide in face to face course interactions (Rowe, 2004).

Virtual guest speakers in an online instructional technology course enhanced students' critical thinking and engagement (Hemphill & Hemphill, 2007). Kumari's (2001) graduate education students encountered new topics and real life examples of technology integration through online discussions with practitioners, and were excited by the discursive environment.

In Wearmouth et al's (2004) post-graduate course for Special Education professionals, the online guest expert explained the politicization of key concepts and terminology in the field, heightening their awareness of controversial issues and recent shifts in policy and practice. Research finds that effective guest speakers communicate well in writing, are content experts, and actively participate in the online forum (Varvel, 2001).

### Description of the Setting

The preservice students in this study were working class bilingual Latinos preparing to teach low income English language learners (ELLs) in a South Texas border region with an 87% hispanic-origin population and a public school system noted for chronic underachievement (Far-

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ruggio & Guerrero, 2009). These future bilingual educators were, in fact, products of that school system.

The dialogue took place during a weekend near the end of the Spring 2008 semester in an ESL Methods course, part of the bilingual teacher preparation program. The students were in their third of four semesters in teacher education. The course instructor sought to enrich their knowledge about second language acquisition by putting them in direct contact with a “knowledgeable other,” a celebrated expert in the field of linguistic minorities’ academic achievement and second language (L2) acquisition.

To motivate participation, the instructor posted five full-text articles written by the guest expert in an online course Blackboard module several weeks in advance, and described her qualifications and reputation in the field of linguistic minority education. Students’ anonymity was protected by individual pseudonyms that they created for the ELC and maintained in a follow up survey.

### Guest Speaker

The guest speaker in this dialogue is a Professor Emerita in the University of California at Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education, and a renowned champion for ELL children, with expertise in second language learning and teaching, linguistic minority education, and the socialization of children for learning across cultures. During 35 years, she has studied ELLs in school settings. She currently researches the academic language demands of high stakes tests and the instructional support needed for ELLs to succeed in such tests and in other uses of academic language.

Widely recognized for her research on social and cognitive processes in language learning, cultural differences in language learning behavior, and L1 retention and loss, Fillmore is also active in the revitalization of indigenous languages in the Southwest and Alaska.

To motivate participation in the ELC, the instructor shared Fillmore’s professional biography in numerous class meetings, and described her warm, caring personality, which he had experienced while studying and doing research with her in graduate school.

### Method

#### Holistic Analysis

The researcher analyzed the online

dialogue holistically to reconstruct how students collaborated in making meaning from the flow of their interactions, a method suggested by scholars from three different social science disciplines. In his evaluation of a transcript analysis, anthropologist Frederick Erickson emphasized the value of a “whole to parts” approach, noting that participants’ engagement in the whole discussion mediates their perceptions of the larger discourse (Erickson, 2004).

Cultural psychologist Carl Ratner (2001) explained the necessity to glean discussants’ intentions by contextualizing their statements, instead of coding isolated utterances. For example, with a factory worker’s statement that “I use all the bathroom breaks I can take,” an atomized coding might interpret his intention as “attending to one’s physical needs,” while holistic analysis would discover the use of bathroom breaks as an expression of the desire to combat management control and exploitation (Ratner, 2001).

Marra et al (2004) highlight the need for holistic content analysis in computer conferencing, noting that to fully understand knowledge construction analysts must discover how coded passages relate to the entire discourse. Following these guidelines, the analysis situated Latino preservice teachers’ comments within the flow of the discourse as a whole.

The researcher was a participant observer, since he laid the groundwork for the discussion (recruited Fillmore, posted pre-readings, and created the ELC), and used his knowledge of the course, the students, and Fillmore to set initial discussion parameters. The students knew that he would be observing the dialogue. However, since he didn’t participate directly in the discussion, his analytical role was more that of an observer (Wolcott, 1992).

#### Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative analysis in general adapts suitable analytical techniques from various methods to gain insights into the phenomenon of inquiry, in effect to put the researcher’s signature on the work (Eisner, 1991; Wolcott, 1992). This analysis adapted various techniques to make sense of participants’ consciousness development in an online discussion. Qualitative content analysis involves repeated focused readings of a text to discover particular categories of meaning that may not be apparent to a superficial observation of the communicative content (Mayring, 2000; Sarvela & McDermott, 1993).

These categories can be discovered by applying an understanding of the contextual environment of the transcript as a whole, including knowledge of the participants, to search for the phenomena of interest in the researcher’s inquiry (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Elo & Kyngas, 2008). When the content analysis has identified specific discussion categories, or topics, the researcher can explore them to find their latent content, the deeper meanings contained in participants’ expressions (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

The theoretical coding technique, used in constructivist grounded theory, enables the analyst to find themes in the latent content by comparing the deeper meanings to discover participants’ unified understandings and intentions across several categories (Charmaz, 2006). Qualitative content analysis may begin with a deductive approach, in which the search for categories is done with a preconceived notion of the phenomena of inquiry, or with an inductive approach that identifies the categories from initial readings of the transcript (Mayring, 2000).

### Analysis and Discussion

The researcher analyzed the verbatim transcript of the ELC discussion between 11 students and Fillmore, attempting to capture significant topics related to new knowledge construction, and the deepening of previous knowledge essential to students’ development as bilingual teachers. He used the discussion transcript as a whole as the unit of analysis in applying content analysis to find meanings within the contextual environment of the data, the content of the communication between the students and Fillmore (Elo & Kyngas, 2008).

Informed by the literature on guest speakers, he began with a deductive content analysis (Mayring, 2000) to find instances of a broadening of the discourse related to the course content or the posted pre-readings, the phenomenon of interest at the beginning of his analysis (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). This broadening of the discourse conforms to research on virtual guest speakers (Rowe, 2004; Kumari, 2001; Wearmouth, et al, 2004).

When the ELC was created and the pre-readings posted, it was expected that students would generate questions derived from Fillmore’s articles, such as approaches to teaching in two languages and the educational conditions necessary for ELLs’ acquisition of academic English, and that Fillmore would deepen their

understanding of language teaching by providing further examples from research and practice.

Such deeper understanding of these issues was accomplished in the early stages of the online discourse. With repeated, more focused readings, the researcher discovered two unanticipated categories in the transcript, family language practices and globalization, not directly related to the course curriculum. The emergence of these unanticipated topics required deeper readings of the transcript with an inductive content analysis (Mayring, 2000) to explain how and why the participants moved into new areas of meaning making.

After exploring the literature on Latino teachers' identity formation, sociopolitical awareness, and advocacy, he applied the inductive analysis to identify the latent content of these categories. Theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006) of both categories' latent content identified a theme to explain the students' expanded awareness as they discussed these new topics: their emergent realization that to become effective Latino teachers of linguistic minorities they would need to incorporate into their practice an understanding of their students' sociopolitical context and an advocacy for Latino immigrant communities. The researcher's status as a participant observer, and his knowledge of the students' sociocultural and educational backgrounds, enabled him to conduct the analysis with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

#### **Category One: Family Language Practices**

The online environment prompted students' introspection about their families' use of Spanish and English. Apparently they trusted Fillmore's sincerity and expertise enough to pose family questions. To a question about the marginalization of Spanish in schools, Fillmore said, "so many people ... say they want to 'save' their children from the hardships they themselves endured as immigrants by not teaching them the language of their heritage... We will never be the people we can be unless we understand ourselves better..."

In response, a student confessed to failing to teach Spanish at home, "... my children were missing out on part of their culture, my culture...What advice would you give parents like me...to prevent this type of error..." Fillmore advised her not to "beat yourself up" for trying to protect her children, and attached a paper she wrote (Fillmore, 2005) about the disadvan-

tages for children when immigrant parents deny the heritage language (L1). Another student said she spoke more Spanish at home to compensate for the English Only (EO) environment of her children's day-care. Fillmore said "...you really ought to be worrying about the effect of their being in an all English child care program!" describing that children in such programs typically lost their L1 in a year (Fillmore, 1991). The student replied that, by reading Fillmore's articles and online comments, "...I am just sorry that I have come this far ... to find out how little I really know."

Another student described the deleterious effects of language loss to her own family's unity, but asked if EO teaching might at least improve children's English acquisition. Fillmore disagreed that L1 loss is a necessary sacrifice for school achievement: "Each of us has the ability to learn ... as many languages as we have the opportunity and need to learn..." explaining that children in EO programs fell behind and never catch up: "It is so sad when I work with kids who...are not making progress in school, and ... have lost their L1s so they are not learning much from their parents either." In this discussion category, Fillmore advised students about their family language practices by deepening the discourse to the pedagogical and societal implications of L1 loss.

The latent content of the discussion in this category reflected awareness of the relationship between their own experiences with native language preservation and the sociocultural implications of language loss in schools and society. Apparently for the first time in their lives, they became explicitly conscious of how their linguistic child rearing practices related to language and cultural issues that affect the immigrant children they were preparing to teach.

Reacting to an earlier dialogue in the ELC about L1 teaching in the schools, the students internalized the topic of L1 preservation and loss, and posed questions related to their own families. In this discourse, Fillmore was able to help them deepen the connection between professional practice issues and practitioners' family lives. The dialogue's explicitness in this category enabled students to see how their practices as family members and parents related to their future roles as bilingual educators and advocates for ELL children.

#### **Category Two: Globalization**

Several students reacted to Fillmore's PowerPoint posting (Fillmore, 2008) about United States nativism, official English laws, and the United States-Mexico border fence. One student entitled a message "Globalization" that said,

...that was the first picture I've seen of the border fence and all I can say is wow...if people want a better life why can't we help them? ...that power point makes me want to go out and burn a bra or something while speaking in Spanish. Ha!

Fillmore recounted the history of anti-immigrant movements and legislation, advising students to hold true to their belief in multiculturalism. A student replied, "How can we...stir up this generation of teachers to be activists?... to truly defend the CHILDREN...." Fillmore's advice, "from a battle-scarred old woman warrior," was to "...always hold true to your principles and beliefs... [Build] coalitions among your colleagues ..."

Opening students' eyes to the broader sociopolitical implications of teaching, the online discussion inspired them to protest "globalization" and the marginalization of immigrants, demonstrating the expansiveness of the discourse. Fillmore led them to a wider conceptualization of teaching by sharing her own life history as a child of immigrants and a "woman warrior" in a way that would have been impossible for most course instructors to accomplish.

In this category's discussion, the students and Fillmore co-constructed a discourse about the importance of recognizing and resisting mainstream nativist language policies. By reading Fillmore's paper about the border fence, students became aware of why these policies would require an expanded conception of their responsibility and identity as educators of ELLs.

In this dialogue, they developed not only an awareness of these issues, but a new self-image as "warriors" and advocates for their future students. The latent content of this discourse had to do with their apparent formulation of a willingness to follow in Fillmore's footsteps to become activist teachers in a reconceptualization of their professional identities.

In an in-class follow-up written survey, administered a few days after the ELC discussion, students reflected on their learning in the dialogue with Fillmore. Most said the discussion raised important issues not addressed in their professional

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courses. Frustrated with the teacher preparation program and appreciative of the broadened discourse, several commented similarly to these two students:

No one had ever talked about globalization.... I feel more educated on topics [about] bilingual education that we never discuss. Like the politics.

I am appalled that this is the first time I participate in a learning activity about LANGUAGE LOSS, which obviously is a keystone to my whole educational philosophy. NOW! Why hadn't I had this opportunity? Would I have just continued plunging onward in ignorance?

Retrospective reflections like these offered an additional dimension for the latent content of the discourse in both categories, the realization that not only were these topics essential for the students' professional growth, but that they had been inexcusably absent from the preservice curriculum that they experienced.

Informed by literature on Latino teachers' identity formation and advocacy, the inductive content analysis found a latent content in the family language practices and globalization categories that had to do with the preservice students' search for ideas they considered important that were missing in their teacher preparation courses. Taking into account their situation as Latinos, linguistic minorities, and future teachers, the theoretical coding found a unifying theme in this latent content.

Students achieved an awareness of the importance of the sociopolitical aspects of language and culture and their own professional identities in becoming effective bilingual educators. In a co-construction of meaning with Fillmore's scaffolding as a knowledgeable other, the students created a new sociocultural and political understanding of their professional lives, an understanding that the preservice program had not managed to give them.

## Conclusion

Participation in the online environment and Fillmore's intervention in the discussion contributed to students' professional growth. She played an exemplary role, consistent with the literature on guest speakers, by motivating student engagement and expanding their awareness of important topics absent from the course and the teacher preparation program. Dialoguing with the author of posted readings heightened students' text interaction, making it more meaningful, since they were able to interact with her about clarification

and application of textual content. Their interaction with Fillmore was deepened by her connection to local practice issues and the sociopolitical tensions in their lives. Her frank, direct responses to students' questions and her ability to "get political" in recontextualizing topics within broader conceptualizations of their relevance to societal issues enabled students to achieve deeper understanding of the sociopolitical effects of language policies in schools and within their own families.

The analysis revealed a co-constructed theme of students' new awareness about the importance of incorporating cultural and sociopolitical consciousness and advocacy into their identities as bilingual educators. Such awareness is essential, given the politicization of bilingual education in the United States by mainstream assimilationist ideologies (Cardinale, et al, 1998).

This deeper understanding was facilitated by the informal, communal, and conversational environment of the ELC, which enabled participants to consider and reference each others' contributions in an open ended manner. The implication for instructors contemplating the use of guest speakers is that meaning making is enhanced when speakers are familiar with the issues faced by students. It seems safe to conclude that an online dialogue with a guest speaker who has genuine expertise and a willingness to engage with students on their own terms can strengthen students' professional preparation.

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